DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 217 486 CS 207 044

AUTHOR Hoetker, James
TITLE Effects of Essay Topics on Student Writing: A Review of the Literature.
PUB DATE [82]
NOTE 30p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Theories; *Essay Tests; Higher Education; Minimum Competency Testing; Motivation Techniques; *Research Needs; State Programs; Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Essay Topics; Florida

ABSTRACT

A review of the literature on the effects upon student writing performance of variations in essay examination topics reveals that such research is sparce and that most of it has been done in the past 5 years. The review, which was conducted as part of a project to develop the writing test portion of the Florida Teacher Certification Examination, shows that several studies have found a relationship between the mode of discourse specified in a topic and the syntactic complexity of students' writing, and that other studies have investigated the variables of (1) degree of specification of rhetorical context, (2) method of selecting topics, (3) optimum time to allow for writing, and (4) provision of optional topics. The review confirms that not enough research exists to make firm statements about the effects of any of these variables and also shows that there are important differences in attitude toward the importance of topic details between professional testmakers and language educators. (FL)

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EFFECTS OF ESSAY TOPICS ON STUDENT WRITING: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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EFFECTS OF ESSAY TOPICS ON STUDENT WRITING

Background

The 1978 Florida legislature charged the Florida Department of Education (DOE) with developing and administering a Teacher Certification Examination which, after 1980, would have to be passed by all applicants seeking initial teaching certification in Florida. An advisory group to the Commissioner of Education, the Council on Teacher Education (COTE), was given primary responsibility for developing the examination. COTE, which had, since 1975, been compiling an inventory of "minimal essential competencies" for teachers, proposed that teachers be examined on their reading, writing, and mathematics skills, and on their knowledge of "professional education."

The writing examination guidelines specified that writing skills were to be examined by means of holistically scored writing samples. (See The Florida Teacher Certification Examination, Bulletins I and II, 1980).

Gordon Brossell and I were given the contract to develop the writing examination. We prepared three volumes for the DOE, concerned primarily with the conduct of the examination, the training of raters, and the mechanics of handling the examination paperwork (Brossell and Hoetker, 1979). We also proposed several topics for the first administrations of the examination. Our work was accepted by COTE without substantial revisions, but several DOE administrators wanted assurances that the proposed topics could withstand legal challenges to their fairness.

Some officials were also concerned more generally about the defensibility of subjectively scored essay examinations.

The DOE, therefore, let a supplementary contract to allow me to review the literature on these two issues: the effects of topics characteristics[1] on students writing performance and the legal standing of essay examinations as requirements for licensing and employment. This paper is a condensation and updating of that portion of my report that dealt with topic effects (Hoetker, 1979).

Certain recommendations about topics which I developed in the course of my review were experimentally evaluated in another DOE-funded study (Brossell, 1980). Subsequently, we applied the findings of both these studies to the production of a pool of topics for future administrations of the examination (Brossell and Hoetker, 1981).

Topics in Competency Tests

A test of minimal competency differs in important ways from an achievement test. An achievement test rank-orders students according to their performance, and, in practical terms, it is most important for such a test to make accurate distinctions among the higher ranks. A minimal competency test, which is intended merely to weed out the imcompetent, produces only two "ranks"--pass or fail. The distribution of passing scores is of no practical moment.

Although there is little data on the effects of topics phrasing on students of different abilities, the consequences of a poorly contrived topic are probably more serious on a minimal competency test. Superior

students of the sort achievement tests seek to identify are, for the most part, academically successful and test-wise. Among their accomplishments is the ability to properly fill in the details commonly omitted from essay questions--e.g., adopt a scholarly register, conform to the writing conventions of the discipline, and so forth.

The students between whom a minimal competency test seeks to discriminate operate at two levels of poor performance--unacceptable and minimally adequate. Students at both these levels are likely to have reading as well as writing difficulties; especially they are likely to lack the ability to intuit the topic writer's unspoken assumptions. A poorly-phrased or ill-conceived topic, therefore, is more likely to have adverse effects on the performance of poorer students.

Scant Research on Topics Effects

Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Shoer claimed that, by 1963, research had demonstrated that "the topic a person writes on affects the caliber of his writing" (p. 17). While the statement about the effect of a topic is certainly true in some regard, the authors' own critiques show it was premature to state that research had demonstrated it.

Until very recently, it would have been more accurate--as McColly noted in his 1970 review--to say that we know little about topic variables because research attention has been devoted almost entirely to issues of rater reliability, ignoring for the part the issue of validity as well as the other two sources of error in an essay examination--the topics and the writer. This situation has at least begun to change.[2]

In the past few years researchers have realized the need for investigating topic variables--or have at least realized the need for controlling them more carefully than has been the custom. Keech (1981), for example, includes the following among the questions to be investigated in a study being conducted in connection with the Bay Area Writing project: "In what ways do differences in the formulation of writing topics...lead to significant differences in readers' ratings?" Similarly, Stiggins (1980) identifies topic characteristics that demand attention: source, "flexibility," realism, and "control over the kinds of skill tested."

The importance of two topic characteristics is so obvious it can be asserted without research backing. The first of these is clarity: a topic must be as well written as possible. Payne (1969) identifies ambiguity in phrasing of a topic as "the single most important contribution to unreliability." The second is fairness; a topic must not demand information, awareness, or special skill that is not likely to be shared by everyone in the population being examined (see McColly, 1980, pp. 152-3).

The real problem is this: given an array of topics meeting the basic criteria of clarity and fairness, what are the topic characteristics that have been demonstrated to affect the quality of student writing? At present there is only one, and that is the mode of discourse called for by the topic. But even this, as we shall see, is not a simple matter.

How Does Mode of Discourse Afect Performance?

Rosen (1969a) presents two essays written by the same student, the

first on "A Typical Day's Shopping," the second on "Boredom." Not surprisingly, he is able to to show that the language of the former is better is every respect. In another study, Rosen (1969b) reports that when students were asked to write successively in different modes--exposition, story, argument--there were differences in average T-unit length from mode to mode. He also observed that the syntactic complexity of essays written by the better students varied most from mode to mode--a difference which he ascribed to the superior adapatability of the bright students.

Other studies reported below have found similar connections between mode of discourse and syntactic complexity. Rosen's study suggests that any connections that do exist between mode and syntactic complexity are mediated by student characteristics. Courts (1977) offers a similar caution.

For example, Rushton and Young (1974) compared essays written by British sixth-form public school boys with essays written by factory workers of the same age. On academic topics the language from the two samples displayed the expected differences between "elaborated" and "restricted" linguistic codes. But when the two groups were asked to write on a technical subject, the linguistic disadvantage of the working class boys disappeared.

Writing in 1971, Veal and Tillman were still able to state that researchers "have not...usually controlled or investigated mode of discourse." They cite only three studies concerned with the problem.

> Seegers, as early as 1933, showed that mode of discourse was related to syntax....Kincaid...and Johnson...have observed

that specific aspects of structure (like length and complexity of clause) are related to mode of discourse" (p. 38).

They found in their study that differences between modes were related to rater judgements of quality.

Dilworth, Reising, and Wolfe (1978) presented a poem to high school students and asked them to write about it from either of two points of view:

"Write...about how this poem makes you feel."

"Write...about what this poem means."

They found that about half the students chose to write in each mode, but that teachers, when asked to nominate the best essay in a class, chose a "what the poem means" eassy over 75% of the time. Crowhurst (1980) reports finding that argumentative essays written by students at grades 6, 10, and 12 were syntactically more complex than narratives written by the same students.

Sanders and Littlefield's 1975 study concludes that "the nature of the essay assignment made a difference," but they seem to be referring more to the constraints of the writing situation than to mode of discourse. At any rate, most research on writing since that date has taken care to try to control for topics effects, usually by casting alternative topics in the same rhetorical mode. But that effort has revealed the uncertainties that still exist in defining and classifying modes. Nold and Freedman (1977), to take one instructive example, controlled for mode of discourse by choosing four topics in an argumentative mode. But two of their topics call for the expression of personal opinion and two call for critical comparisons between two quotations--a difference in "mode" that

is surely more likely to influence the details of student writing than the difference between argument and, say, description. And Nold and Freedman did discover differences between the personal and impersonal essays--the personal essays were, for instance, longer and somewhat less complex (p. 170).

In the preliminary stages of her work, Bridwell (1980) encountered a similar problem. She wrote a topic intended to limit student essays to the explantory mode. The students, though, persisted in going beyond explanations to argue that their ideas were correct. Bridwell wisely chose to drop the traditional rhetorical categories and to use Britton's term "transactional" to cover both the explanations and arguments her topic elicited.

This is a good illustration of the difficulties that arise when we assume that our intending a topic to direct students to write in a particular mode will indeed cause them to write in that mode. The operational model of discourse of a topic--the mode that directs what sort of essay is written by a student--is, of course, the mode that a student interprets the topic as calling for. A topic is, after all, a text; and, as Horton (1979) put it,

> It is of course, the reader...who makes all these decisions about what form the work is in, and how to make meaning out of the material rendered in the form he judges it to be.....It is the reader... whose relation to the text determines its meaning... The reader...cannot be a passive recipient of the text, because he comes to it with various structures--explaining himself and the world--fully formed (p. 123).

Flower and Hayes (1970) make something of the same point. Students "misread" (in Harold Bloom's sense of the word) and restructure according to their needs and backgrounds. Some attempts to control student misreadings are discussed below in the section on rhetorical context.

Finally, Hirsch (1977) interprets the data from the Nold and Freedman study cited above to mean that a students writing on different topics "will exhibit far greater variations in the quality of his ideas... than in the quality of his presentations" (p. 187). This is certainly in line with most teachers' experience, through it is probably an overgeneralization from the evidence, since only nine of 22 students showed the effect. If Hirsch's principle is accepted, though, it might indicate that differences in mode (and other topic characteristics) are less important in a holistically-scored skills examination than in an examination of subject matter mastery--for holistic scoring concentrates the rater's attention on the relatively invariant "quality of presentation."

What are Effects of Rhetorical Context?

Current theory and opinion identify the amount of information about the rhetorical context--audience, voice, purpose--as a vital characteristic of the topic (Cooper and Odell, 1978. The topics used in recent studies of writing, therefore, have tended to be lengthy and rather highly structured. The topic cited by Bridwell (1980), for instance, approaches in length and completeness one of the case problems familiar from business writing textbooks.[3]

Mellon (1975), criticizing the first National Assessment of Writing, asserted the NAEP topics were "imprecisely formulated" because they did

not specify the rhetorical context fully enough. This imprecision, he argued, led to student essays so diverse in mode that there were "no common features of the writing on which to judge and compare" (pp. 35-6). Mellon's criticisms were a factor in NAEP's developing elaborate topics--scenarios, really--intended to elicit essays suitable for Primary Trait scoring (Mullis, 1980). The American College Testing Program has been experimenting with even more imaginatively contrived topics--they amount to simulation games--using media of various sorts (Steele, 1979). The idea in both cases seems to be that providing more information will make the writing situation more "real" for the writers, and thereby cause them to write their best.

The idea is reasonable, and it may be true. There is yet no data either way. But my own experience--in teaching writing to accounting seniors and in field testing topics for the Teacher Certification Examination--gives me pause on two counts.

First, the more information students are given--the more language they have to process--the greater seem to be the opportunities for creative misreadings and simple confusion. Second, the more information students are given, the more difficult they seem to find it to get beyond the language of the topic to discover their own language. The first exception raises the possiblity that full rhetorical specification may lead to more diverse essays rather than more similar ones. The second raises the possibility that, if greater similarity is observed, it may have been achieved only because everyone is using the concepts and vocabulary of the topic.

Another caution needs to be raised about the popular practice of incorporating rhetorical specifications into scenario-like topics. In

any test situation and in most experiments, the comparability of topics becomes an issue at some point. When topics are set in the form of scenarios, the language in which the rhetorical information is given may differ drastically from topic to topic, which may lead to all sorts of uncertainties when it comes time to compare and generalize. An old-fashioned alternative, applicable when all topics are in the same mode, is simply to supply the desired contextual information by direct statements in a standard set of instructions, keeping the topics proper very brief. This method has the design advantage of holding constant the information provided about rhetorical context. It may have the further advantage of reducing the range of misreadings.

I must admit here that the statements in the two preceding paragraphs are made with full benefit of hindsight. In point of fact, I recommended in the original version of this review that topics for the Teacher Certification Examination should take the form of scenarios simulating writing tasks likely to come up in the course of a teacher's work. I made the recommendation, not because I had found any research basis for it, but (1) because I had been convinced by the arguments in favor of recent NAEP and ACT practices, and (2) because I was cautious. I had figured: since so many people think that a full rhetorical context can help students, it is probably safer to give the students more information rather than less.

Brossell's (1980) experimental comparison of topics at three levels of "informational load" forced me to retract my original recommendation, in favor of one for briefer, simpler, less completely specified topics.

The whole matter of how much rhetorical specification is optimal

for what purposes--and of how that specification should be supplied--is unsettled, though it seems that a good deal of work on the subject is now in progress.

Other Topics Characteristics

In addition to mode of discourse and amount of rhetorical specification, researchers and test-makers have raised questions about three other aspects of essay examination topics:

1. How should topics be produced and validated?
2. How much time should students be give to write?
3. Should optional topics be provided?

How are Topics Written and Validated?

Over the years, the major testing services have devoted systematic attention to topic development and validation. Educational Testing Service practices are described in, e.g., Conlan (1976), ETS (1971), and Noyes (1963). Current NAEP practices have been explained in Brown (1980), Lloyd-Jones (1977); and Mullis (1976; 1977; 1980). Recent developments in the American College Testing Program's work are described in Huntley, et al. (1979) and Steele (1979). In common, these organizations create their topics by means of an orderly and often elaborate succession of editorial screens and field tests.

Some research reports and most reports of state and institutional testing programs reveal a contrasting lack of care--not only for the process of topic production, but also for topics themselves. Such reports often do not reproduce the texts of topics; even if they do, they rarely give information about the process by which the topics were written and selected. To take just a few typical examples: Swanson (1975) reports students being asked to "elaborate on a subject of choice." A 1977 report from the California State Department of Education notes in passing that students were randomly assigned "one of five topics." The Educational Research Institute of Bristish Columbia (1977) notes that students "wrote on five selected topics" provided by a committee of English professors. Duke (1974) provides samples to topics used in a college testing program, but says almost nothing about where the topics came from.

The Georgia Board of Regents has pioneered in the sort of testing program on which Florida and other states have recently embarked. Students taking the Georgia writing test are given two optional topics selected from a long list of topics (see Rentz, 1978). All the topics, it may be assumed, were intended as functionally equivalent. But in the extensive literature on the Georgia testing program, there is no real explanation of how the topics were devised and validated.

Even a quick inspection of the list of topics in use in 1977 raises some serious questions. Here are two of the topics:

> 15. Do you favor or oppose the goals of the women's liberation movement in the United States? Why?

16. Is too much emphasis placed on grades in our education system? Explain. (Rentz, 1978, p. 5.).

What is the difference between Why and Explain? Are students supposed to do different things in response to these lexically distinct injunctions? If so, what? Is there a reason why topic 15 is so phrased as to invite a personal response, while topic 16 is phrased so as to allow an objective consideration of the issue? In response to topic 15, must the student take a pro or con position? Would a balanced consideration be inappropriate? Does not "women's liberation" have overtones different from, say, "Women's Movement"? Would the topics elicit the same responses if the latter phrase were substituted? And so on. These questions are so obvious and elementary that it is hard to suppose that the topic development process consisted of much besides someone's thinking of the topics and writing them down.

However, and this must be emphasized, there is little hard evidence anywhere that students will write any worse (or any better) on topics such as those I have just criticized than on the most thoughtfully considered and carefully edited topics.

A cavalier attitude toward topics can sometimes cause problems, though. Students taking the California State University and College Equivalency Examination write a 90 minute essay on a set topic. According to White (1974) a committee of English professors is charged with writing the topics, and the details are explicitly "left to the discretion of the Committee on English." Scores on the 1973 and 1974 English examinations were found to differ drastically, and the topics on the two examinations were reviewed. It was concluded that the 1974 topic, which called for some highly abstract reasoning, was manifestly more demanding

than the 1973 topic, which called for reflection on a personal experience. White remarks: "It is the intention of the directors...to give more thought, more attention, and more money to the development of essay questions."

How Much Time to Write?

The briefer the examination period, the less the conditions will resemble those under which a student can do his best writing. The briefer the examination period, the higher the premium put on native glibness and prior experience in impromptu writing. Because of these and other relationships between time and performance, the length of the examination period has commonly been considered an aspect of the topic.

The time allowed for writing skills tests has varied widely. Most college and university assessment programs use a 45 or 50 minute class period, for obvious reasons. In their classic study of writing evaluation, Godschalk, Swineford, and Coffman (1966) had 646 students write five essays apiece, each essay of a different rhetorical type. Students were given 40 minutes to write three of these essays and (without explanation) 20 minutes to write the other two. Various examinations from the national testing organizations provide periods ranging from 20 to 90 minutes.

In a study undertaken in support of the Georgia Regents program, students were allowed unlimited time to complete an essay examination usually administered in 45 minutes. Of 161 students taking the test, 147 took more time than usually provided. The study's design did not allow the investigators to say whether the additional time yielded

higher ratings (Fort Valley College, 1974). Another study in the same series compared essays written under four conditions: 30 and 45 minute time limits with a choice of topics, and 30 and 45 minute time limits with one assigned topic. Students writing under the 30 minute time limit with a choice of topics wrote significantly inferior essays--presumably because they spent too much time deciding what to write about. (Regents Testing Program, 1977).

Henderson (1977) compares the holistic ratings given essays with analytical ratings given the same essays by rathers using a Diederich-type scale. The analyses concentrated on differences between essays rated "1" (failing) and those rated "2" (minimally passing). "Mechanical factors, including spelling, punctuation, usage are not the principal reason for failure on the essays. For level 1 (failing) essays, the scores on mechanical criteria relatively high." "A lack of time may be a contributing cause," since the low-rated essays were weakest in paragraph structure development and thesis development. The study recommends that a minimum of one hour should be provided for a writing skills test.

We included a "further comments?" section on a questionnaire we distributed to students during a field test of topics for the Florida Teacher Certification Examination. Only about 10% of the students volunteered they need more than the 45 minutes provided.

While it is no doubt true that a highly competent student can give clear evidence of his or her superior writing skills in 20 minutes or even less, a full hour should probably be provided on a minimal competency examination, just so the students at the lower end of the distribution have a fair chance to do the best work they are capable of.

A Single Topic or Options?

The weight of opinion comes down on the side of the single topics, though not because there is much evidence to refer to. Meyer (1939) argues that students should not be allowed options because they lack the ability to choose the option on which they will perform best. This canard persists in the testing literature, being repeated as recently as 1976 by Mehrens, who adds injury to insult by stating that options may penalize the brighter student, who will tend to choose the more difficult topic and not be able to treat it adequately in the time provided. (p. 104).

The Georgia Regents study (1977), already cited above, concludes it was "not clear whether choice or no choice would result in improvement." DuCette and Wolk (1976) compared performances of 187 college students on single-topics and optional-topic forms of an educational psychology midterm examination. They found that students given options performed significantly more poorly. They offer little explanation for the results and cautiously conclude that "with another type of test," giving options could produce the opposite result.

The chapter on essay tests in Gronlund (1977) argues against the provision of options except in special situations. "If the essay is to be used as a measure of writing skill only, some choice of topics on which to write may be desirable." (p. 72; author's emphasis).

Brossell and I (1981) found no differences between mean ratings of 350 essays written in response to single-topic and optional-topics forms of an examination. We did find, however, from student responses to a

questionnaire accompanying the examination, that many students had strong preferences for either "public issue" topics or "private introspection" topics. (Emig (1971) and Perl (1979) use the terms "extensive" and "reflexive" to refer to roughly the same distinction.) The Dilworth, et al. (1978) study similarly shows students preferring to write either subjectively or objectively, and in about equal numbers. A possible justification for providing optional topics might be, that, if one public (extensive) and one private (reflexive) topic were provided, most students could be assured of being able to do the sort of writing they feel most comfortable with. But the strongest argument for options is that we know so little about topics that it is presumptuous for us to say we can know which topic will elicit student's best performance.

Conclusions

Mode of discourse is related to the syntactic complexity of student essays and to readers' ratings of them. Exactly how it all works, no one is yet sure. We need definitions of mode of discourse that are more functional. As we seek to understand how both mode of discourse and degree of rhetorical specification affect student performance, we need to remind ourselves that every essay test is, first and importantly, an exercise in reading and interpretation. The best topic-production techniques now available involve nothing more than care, sensitivity, and field-testing. Until we have empirical data to direct our writing of topics, everyone should at least be urged to look skeptically at proffered topics. The questions of time and options are unsettled and

it is best to base decisions about these matters on judgments of the students' interests rather than the testers' convenience.

Probably because every English teacher writes hundreds of essay topics in the course of a career, and encounters hundreds more in textbooks, the difficulties of producing good and valid topics to be used in special situations--such as minimal competency examinations--are hard to appreciate. As this review has shown, researchers have only very recently given serious attention to the matter of the topic. If real progress is going to be made in the technology of assessing writing skills (and there is a growing need and demand for such assessment), then at least as much effort is going to have to be put into understanding the complexities of topics as has been put into establishing rater reliability.

Footnotes

[1] The term topic, in this review, consistently means the text to which students respond by writing an essay. Other writers variously refer to this text as assignment, exercise, problem, prompt, situation, stimulus, task, and so forth.

[2] Since about 1970 there has also been an increasing research interest in the effects upon writing performance of student variables. Among those that have been investigated are race, sex, social class, motivation, writing apprehension, and preference for speaking or writing.

[3] A pedagogical tradition embodied in some business writing textbooks assumes the desirability--or necessity-- of highly elaborate topics. Sometimes, the topic or case problem dwarfs the piece of writing the student is asked to produce. In addition--and this is an approach to rhetorical specification I have not seen mentioned in the literature--some business writing textbooks call on the student to establish a persona which is to be maintained through several assignments. Hatch (1977), for example, asks students to assume a junior executive persona in which they will write messages in half a dozen modes.

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